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Witte van Citters, J. d. (1873). *Contracten van correspondentie en andere bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van het ambtsbejag in de republiek der vereenigde nederlander. 's-Gravenhage: Nijhoff.*

Records

National Archives [NA]

Records Provincial Court of Holland [PC] (access number: 3.03.01.01);

Inv. nr. 5312.17 (1676), *Sentence regarding Lodewijk Huygens, sheriff of Gorinchem*

Inv. nr. 5316.23 (1678), *Papers regarding Lodewijk Huygens*

Inv. nr. 5317.25 (1678), *Papers regarding Lodewijk Huygens*

Endnotes

¹ Brokerage entailed situations where intermediaries could use their access to influential persons or public means to make other people dependent on them.

² *Parangage* is a special type of interpersonal relation in which bonds are formed between individuals of unequal power and socioeconomic status, with the aim of extracting mutual benefits through exchange of favors. Its main function is to (re)produce effective ways of promoting the interests of patrons and clients.

³ Family relations considerably complicated matters. According to Roorda, Constantijn Sr. was aware that suspicions against Lodewijk Huygens could have serious consequences for his elder brother Constantijn Jr. Allegations against Constantijn Jr. would be easier to make if his younger brother Lodewijk was found guilty of abuses (Roorda, 1984: 104). Groeneweld furthermore tells us in detail of Constantijn Senior's efforts to obtain and secure considerable positions for both his sons (Groeneweld, 1988).

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Political Corruption Scandals in the Netherlands in the Nineteenth Century: The Letters Affair of 1865

Ronald Kroeze

Preface: "Bouwfraude"

By the end of 2001 the Dutch political climate was severely polarized as a result of, among other reasons, integration problems, an economic recession, and the arrival on the scene of the successful political protest leader Pim Fortuyn. In this climate, the Dutch TV programme *Zembla* revealed in November that civil servants had for many years been taking bribes from large construction companies in exchange for favouring these companies in public construction orders. Dutch opinion leaders, members of Parliament and civilians were shocked and asked for an investigation. As a result, the Dutch Parliament agreed to start a so-called *parlementaire enquête* (parliamentary inquiry); a sort of public tribunal in which everybody who has been subpoenaed by the special investigation commission—consisting of members of Parliament from all political parties—is cross-examined under oath. A year later, the commission finished its investigations and concluded that fraud had indeed been going on for many years, and that already by 1998 the first signals that things were going wrong had been communicated to the Department of Justice. What was most striking, however, was not only the mere fact that civil servants had been bribed, but that this had been going on for so many years without any action being taken to stop it. The former minister of Justice, by then minister of Defence, resigned after the presentation of the report. The criminal prosecutions were accompanied by great moral indignation, which fitted the climate of growing polarization well. It stimulated the call for political and moral renewal and the discussion about moral standards in politics and public administration. After the dramatic election of 2002—when the ruling coalition government suffered an overwhelming defeat—the *bouwfraude* became one of the major reasons for the new coalition government to stimulate a wider debate about public values and norms, and to discuss the question how civilians, businesspeople, civil servants and politicians should deal with these aspects (www.parlement.com, *Parlementaire Enquête Bouwfraude*, 2002-2003).

Introduction

The example of the *bonwfrande* illustrates a number of self-evident components of corruption scandals: the role of the media required to make a scandal public, the myriads of different actors with different public roles and opinions, the difference between formal public behaviour and the actions of public officials behind the scenes, the persistence of systematic "corruption" in democratic societies committed to its eradication, and—ultimately the most important for our research—it illustrates that definitions of "corruption" are strongly related to broader moral concerns about public values.

In recent years growing attention has been paid to public values and ethical behaviour in the public sphere. *The Genesis of Public Value Systems* project is concerned with understanding the development of public values by analyzing examples of (alleged) corruption. Because we are interested in the historical development of, and the changes and differences in, public values, we analyze historical corruption cases. In my own Ph.D. research project I analyze public values and corruption cases in the Netherlands (1850-1950) with special focus on international developments. In this article, I will discuss an example of a nineteenth-century political corruption scandal in the Netherlands, the so-called "Letters Affair."

The chief facts of the case are easily summarized. In 1865, important liberal politicians were involved in a case of election corruption by writing controversial letters. Newspapers, politicians and civilians used the word "corruption" to describe the case (HTK, 12 December 1865: 341) or at least called it an "act of imprudence" (*Algemeen Handelsblad*, 21 November 1865). Citizens sent letters to Parliament to express their disgust, and newspapers of different political colours published articles about the case for many weeks. What was considered especially scandalous was the involvement of politicians and public officials of the liberal party, because they always presented themselves as morally superior. Dutch liberals in the nineteenth century were very concerned with developing a modern political society. Since 1848, the liberals had led a reform program in which they emphasized that the public and political spheres would be renewed in both legal and moral aspects. They introduced a real parliamentary system, strengthened central government, and paid much attention to the development of new values regarding "good public behaviour" that would apply to all public officials, such as parliamentarians, mayors and civil servants. During the first decades after 1848, a varied group of politicians followed the "liberal" reform critically. They were called "conservatives" and criticized the liberals for going about their reforms too rashly and radically. Both conservatives and liberals thought themselves the most suitable for leading the government and the public administration, but it was mainly the liberals who were dominating government, Parliament and other public organs. In general, the difference between liberals and conservatives was not ideological but connected with the reform that was started in 1848. Conservatives wanted a gradual reform of laws, norms and values, while liberals favoured a drastic approach. Especially during the 1860s these two political groups were sharply opposed. There was a continuous struggle between them, although both groups were loose formations and did not constitute political parties in a modern sense. When in 1865 a

provocative letter written by the liberal minister of Finance was published, conservatives and liberals clashed and a corruption scandal was born. This article seeks to answer the question that arises from the components outlined above: in all of this, what can we conclude about the development of public values in the Dutch public administration and political system during the early years of Holland's parliamentary system?

In this article special attention is paid to debates in political assemblies and newspapers; standards for public rectitude will be implicitly dealt with. However, a connection will be made between political corruption scandals and important political historical developments in the second half of the nineteenth century, in which the public sphere was dominated by the nineteenth-century liberal view on public rectitude. In Part I, I hope to offer more insight into the way in which cases of (alleged) corruption may help an in-depth analysis of public values and illustrate how the concept of political corruption scandals is used in this article. In Part II, the Letters Affair will be described in greater detail, and this section will also include an analysis of those values and rules of behaviour prevailing at the time of the Letters Affair that shaped dominant notions of public rectitude, and of the importance of these values within the debate on corruption. Finally, attention will be paid to how this particular case was dealt with: i.e., how was corruption handled and what kinds of measures were considered.

Part I: Political Corruption Scandals as a Tool for Analysing Public Values

How to Analyse Public Values on the Basis of Corruption Scandals?

In the research project *The Genesis of Public Value Systems* we try to make a connection between corruption and the public values of the period in which it occurs. This concept of linking public values, corruption and historical changes is relatively new but has proved fruitful in earlier research (Moore and Smith, 2007: 7). Although a single definition of corruption is hard to give—it depends on the time, the culture and the sort of action involved—it is nevertheless possible to provide some insight into the way the term will be used in this article. In this paper I use the concept of "political corruption scandals," which combines insights from different approaches to the study of corruption.

In order to distil knowledge about the development of public values from an analysis of corruption, there must be a connection between "corruption" and "public." Michael Johnston's broad definition may help us here. As Johnston says, after studying the phenomenon of corruption over time and in different political cultures, corruption is "the abuse, according to the legal or social standards constituting a society's system of public order, of a public role or resource for private benefit" (Johnston, 1996: 333). What is most helpful about this definition is that it is broad but still has directive power. It is about "abuse," whether legal or moral, and it has to do with being active as a public figure—with the attendant public role, function and expectation pattern—and at the same time undertaking actions that are regarded as corrupt.

Johnston is not, however, very clear about what exactly "abuse" is (Moore and Smith, 2007: 6). In fact, it is up to society and especially the public in a specific historical context to say what is corruption and what is not. Johnston (1996) has pointed out that actions by which persons directly and financially benefit themselves or their own family constitute a central component in modern understandings of corruption. On the other hand, there is the classical approach of, for example, Machiavelli, in which corruption is considered an attack on the moral health of a society. What seems most fruitful is a neo-classical approach, because it unites "modern notions of corrupt politics with classical concerns about the moral health of whole societies," according to Johnston. In this approach corruption is still considered the abuse of public roles for private benefit, but at the same time corruption is also seen as a "political and moral issue" (Johnston, 1996: 331). However, I would point out that corruption, especially in this broad conceptual use, is concerned not only with direct private financial benefit, but also with more indirect forms of benefit for persons or groups of persons: cronyism, nepotism, favouritism, and so on. What is considered corruption should in any event not be restricted to conventional contemporary definitions. As we shall see, in 1865 the term "corruption" was used for what had unfortunately taken place in the Letters Affair: not only the direct financial benefit of a particular person, group or party, but also the moral health or political morality of the nineteenth-century political system and the public administration was at stake.

Reconstructing historical definitions of corruption requires an analysis of the debate in which public opinion about identified cases of corruption is expressed. In this debate, society can express its opinion and disapproval and present its views on public values. This is especially the case when the (alleged) corruption becomes a society-wide scandal (Moودية, 1989: 873). Corruption causes much more indignation and anxiety than do "normal" political mistakes (Moore and Smith, 2007: 8). Scandals are good indicators of "social declaration and declamation" (Garrard, 2007: 30) and therefore useful for analysing the development of public values. Corruption scandals are often the result of disappointing public expectations about a particular public person or office, in other words, officials offending the public expectation pattern. The public did not expect the functionary to act as he did. A corruption scandal in this sense is about the abuse of trust in a person and in the public office (Garrard, 2007: 28 and 29). Finally, as Moudie (1989) has pointed out, there are three other requirements for a scandal to erupt: the presence of "an exposé or informer," "channels through which to communicate the message" and "an audience or public" which makes the particular case "scandalous" (Moudie, 1989: 879).

Because public values are related to the moral health of a society and determine what is considered corrupt, the political context is important. Notions of "moral health" have a great deal to do with the political context and historical developments. These developments concern not only ordinary power politics and elite struggles but also changing rules, forms and styles of public behaviour (Te Velde and De Haan, 1996), developments and conflicts within a civic culture (Kennedy, 2005: 20 and 21) and the rise of discontent caused by, for example, economic setbacks. According to Johnston, corruption is about "rules, roles and conflict" (Johnston, 1996: 327). A scandal shows that there is conflict in a society about what is "right" and "wrong," and about what the roles of public officials and the rules of "good governance," "good public ad-

ministration," "good politics" and "good public behavior" should be (Moudie, 1989: 879). Although a corruption scandal is usually an example of an individual or single act of corruption, that act is presumed to be linked to a wider pattern of misuse (Garrard, 1996: 30). Therefore, corruption cases give insight into broad political tensions that have existed for many years (Moore and Smith, 2007: 18). This also explains why the smallest corruption cases can sometimes become huge scandals. Especially in times of political polarization, values and norms regarding politics and public administration are (re)constructed as the result of conflict and debate (De Haan, 2004). In the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, there was much disagreement about the distinctions between private and public, and between the particular and the general interest.

Part II: Nineteenth-Century Liberal Politics and the Letters Affair of 1865

The Letters Affair in Brief

In 1862 the Dutch liberals were in the heyday of their power and the liberal leader J.R. Thorbecke became prime minister for the second time. In time, however, the liberals started to disagree on several subjects, generating room for opposition to Thorbecke's cabinet. Some local political leaders, especially in the southern province of Limburg, who were also members of Parliament, withdrew their support for Thorbecke. They disagreed with his centralist governing style, in which the provincial administration became more and more dependent on the administration and politics in The Hague. Members of Parliament from Limburg who still supported Thorbecke were cynically called "ministerians" because of their apparently blind support for every government measure. Moreover, in the autumn of 1865 a cattle plague spread over the country, which killed thousands of animals. The liberal government, especially the Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior Thorbecke, was criticised for its inability to stop the disease.

Hence, the political climate was already polarised when in November 1865 rumours arose that important liberal politicians, among them Thorbecke, were involved in unduly influencing the parliamentary elections in the province of Limburg. It was said that liberal candidates for Parliament had shown the Limburg voters letters written by the liberal Minister of Finance G.H. Betz and by Thorbecke. In these letters the ministers promised that the tax increase for Limburg would be reversed if the province voted for liberal candidates. Other important public officials also seemed to be involved. While members of the Limburg *Provinciale Staten* (the provincial legislature) and conservatives in the national Parliament were debating the matter, liberal politicians tried to ignore the rumours for several days. On November 14th Thorbecke replied arrogantly to a question by the conservative MP J.P.P. van Zuylen van Nijeveld about the rumours, "First of all I'll say this...: the elections in this country have never been as free and will never be more free than they are at the moment. And when some people speak of letters written by me, let them be shown, and I shall publish them in the State Gazette." He tried to downplay the question further by saying that these rumours did not merit attention because they were "plucked from the slums and the backstreet districts" (HTK, 14 November 1865, 132).

The source of the problem was the publication of a letter written by the liberal Finance minister Betz in the anti-liberal Limburg newspaper *Venloosch Weekblad* on 18 November. During the election campaign of 1864 Betz had written a letter to a liberal-minded member of Parliament representing the district of Maastricht in Limburg, P. Th. van der Maesen de Sombreff. During his re-election campaign in 1864, Van der Maesen had shown Betz's letter to voters in the district of Maastricht in an attempt to win their support. In it, Betz promised that the tax increases for Limburg which he had proposed in The Hague would be cancelled in exchange for liberal support from Limburg voters. Betz had written to Van der Maesen:

With you I hope that... the liberal principles in Limburg will be victorious... And... thanks to the loyal support of the Limburg delegates in the two Chambers.¹ [I have] made you a promise that I shall cancel the land tax, if only the attitude of the Limburg voters would make it possible for me to do so. People in Limburg will see that the Minister of Finance is not so bad after all (*Algemeen Handelsblad*, 22 November 1865).

According to a contemporary liberal politician and historian, who remembered the case in his memoirs afterwards, it was very clear "that the unfavourable tax proposals would be repealed in case the election should show a favourable result for the liberals. Moreover, in his letter Betz reported that the director of taxes in Limburg had been ordered to operate very carefully and calmly, and 'not to prosecute small tax offenders'" (Van Weideren Rengers, [1888] 1948: 316). This meant that high-ranking civil servants were also involved in the scandal. The liberal newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad* had to admit that Betz "could at least be blamed for an act of imprudence, something which we had not expected from him" (*Algemeen Handelsblad*, 21 November 1865). A political corruption scandal was born when others, especially conservatives, spoke openly of "corruption." Van Zuylen van Nijeveld, for example, explained the case in classical terms and saw it as harmful to "political morality." This viewpoint was also shared by the entrepreneur P. Regout from the Limburg city of Maastricht. He described Betz's actions (which possibly also involved others) as "corruption" because it was "not noble" (HTK, 11 December 1865: 317).

However, according to Van Zuylen, this was a matter of corruption in another, more contemporary sense as well: he connected it with "private direct financial benefit." At that time, the Netherlands had a system of census suffrage: the right to vote was based on taxation, possessions and property. Some hundred thousand men were wealthy enough to possess the right to vote. Of course, these men were concerned about every change in the taxation system. Van Zuylen pointed out that the Limburg affair was a case of corruption because some of the persons implicated, especially Van der Maesen de Sombreff, but also the Limburg voters, "could calculate down to the last penny what financial advantage they would derive from the withdrawal of the tax proposal" (HTK, 12 December 1865: 341).

¹ The Dutch Parliament consists of the First and Second Chambers. They can be compared to the British Parliamentary institution: the First Chamber is equivalent to the House of Lords, the Second Chamber to the House of Commons.

However, before a real debate in Parliament on the corruption scandal could start, Finance Minister Betz resigned on 20 November 1865. The liberals saw Betz's departure as an attempt to restore the dignity of the Minister and of politics in general. According to Prime Minister Thorbecke, who announced Betz's resignation in Parliament, it was inevitable that Betz should stand down: "The Minister understands that this letter exposes him to allegations, accusations, and charges to which a Minister should not be exposed. Thus, he has asked the King to release him from his office" (HTK, 22 November 1865).

The Dominance of Liberal Rules and Values since 1848

In February 1848 demonstrations and upheavals broke out which led to the downfall of the July Monarchy in France. Subsequently, many European capitals witnessed revolutions which led, or threatened to lead, to political change. In March 1848, the Dutch King William II, strongly influenced by foreign developments, placed the reform-minded liberal politicians in the centre stage of Dutch politics. A special committee began framing a new constitution (*Rapport*, 2005: 133-135), which shaped a national political framework and created a new public sphere for citizens and public officials, in which new public values became important. Although they did not succeed everywhere, liberal bourgeois politicians dominated this European reform movement.

Most of the European liberals, including the Dutch, were concerned with establishing new forms of "good citizenship" and "good governance and politics" (Te Velde and Van Sas, 1998: 147-150; Kennedy, 2005: 15; Kahan, 2003: 8). They justified their political power by claiming that they had the "capacity" (or "character") to govern and would serve the general interest better than conservative aristocrats, on the one hand, or radical democrats, on the other (Kahan, 2003: 6). This quasi-Kantian, morally elevated form of politics meant that politicians and other public officials should act independently, be more aware of the difference between public and private, and serve only the "general interest." Those who were active in the public sphere – not only politicians but also civil servants and citizens – should show "appropriate," "formal," "strict," "honorable" and "decent" behavior (Kloek and Tilmans, 2002: 244-246 and 315-320). When politicians and other public officials observed these values and ideals, they would have the "ability" to participate in politics and public administration. Of course, the liberals saw themselves as the most able persons to govern and to be active as public officials. This liberal view was a European phenomenon and was found not only in the Netherlands but also in England and France (Kahan, 2003: 8-10).

In the Netherlands, the liberal leader Thorbecke tried to enforce these public values by a formal style (Te Velde, 2002: Chapter I). Influenced by French doctrinal liberals, such as François Guizot, he reformed the state and defined new relationships between local, regional and national politics and administration by his "*Geneemte wet*" (Municipal Act) and "*Provinciewet*" (Provincial Act) (Randeraad, 1994). For politicians and administrators on the national and local levels this meant that their work became more centralised and more concerned with the general interest. The introduction of free, direct general elections and full ministerial responsibility, which broke the power of the elite around the monarchy, was also laid down in the constitution. One of the main

reasons for this was the desire to make politicians and other public officials more independent from their districts or the (elite around the) King, so that they could take decisions without being influenced by their voters and could better serve the "general interest" (Randeraad and Wolffram, 2001: 105). Civil servants, politicians and other public officials should not make decisions which would favour political, private or local interest; only the general interest should be served. Before 1848, it was common to appoint officials on the basis of, to quote Thorbecke, "family background rather than ability" (Aerts, 1999: 102). From 1848 onward, appointments and decisions were to be based on rational criteria and take place in public rather than behind the scenes. No longer would cronyism, local clientelism or nepotism be a force in the distribution of public offices (Randeraad and Wolffram, 1998: 40). Another important change was the introduction of the freedom of press, to guarantee the development of a public sphere in which a rational and open debate could be the basis for political decisions.

Under the leadership of the straightforward and unconventional Thorbecke—who had written the constitution's first draft almost single-handedly—the achievements of the "liberal revolution" and constitution were defended and expanded during the two decades following 1848. Although the new order shocked the old conservative elite and polarised the political climate of the country, Thorbecke succeeded in making the Netherlands a parliamentary democracy dominated by liberal-bourgeois values. He became the most prominent and best-known politician of his time, and for both the liberals and their opponents embodied the changes of 1848 and the new rules and public values.

Eventually most conservatives accepted the new system but still criticized the radical elements and the liberal claims for moral superiority. Conservatives, including many members of the Dutch aristocracy, supported the reforms of 1848 but did not agree with the liberal domination, with its radical style and claim of moral superiority. The anti-liberal conservatives were in favour of a gradual reform and also demanded power and influence. During the 1860s, their influence in society and politics increased (De Jong, 1999). The Letters Affair offered them an opportunity to cut the liberal moral superiority down to size and regain power and influence.

As noted above, the most important values were those of serving the general, instead of the particular, interest, the independence of public officials, and openness in every matter of public importance. Liberals had vociferously articulated these rules and values in the press, and the public now came to expect a corresponding pattern of behavior from liberal politicians. In addition, the liberals were seen as honourable, decent and honest. Hence, the fact that liberal politicians, especially well-known figures such as Betz and Thorbecke, were involved in the Letters Affair made it a matter of great importance. It shows that the position of the person considered to be involved in a case of corruption is a crucial factor in making it an actual corruption scandal (Garraad, 2007, 28).

Violation of Values by Politicians, Public Officials and Civil Servants?

Although Finance Minister Betz had resigned, the Letters Affair was far from over. Newspapers

in Limburg, such as, for instance, the *Venloosch weekblad* and the *Francophone L'ami des intérêts Limbourgeois*, and local anti-liberal politicians asked for further investigation. The largest newspaper of the Netherlands, the liberal *Algemeen Handelsblad*, tried to downplay the question; it wrote that what Betz had done was not right, but to make such a political issue of it as the opposition had done was "absurd" (*Algemeen Handelsblad*, 21 November 1865). The conservative newspaper *Dagblad van Zuid-Holland en 's-Gravenhage* had fuelled the scandal already a month earlier, when it published an incriminating letter by P.F.E. van Wintershoven, who had lost the 1864 election to Van der Maesen. Van Wintershoven claimed that not only Betz had written a letter, but that there was also one in existence written by Thorbecke, containing controversial material (*Dagblad van Zuid-Holland en 's-Gravenhage*, 22 October 1865).

Meanwhile, in the national Parliament the debate continued. As a result of the first days of the debate that followed the resignation of Betz, the implicated member of Parliament Van der Maesen de Sombreff also vacated his seat because, as he told Parliament in a letter of 25 November, "there is a suggestion that I did not gain my seat in the Second Chamber independently." He also suggested that Thorbecke had written to him concerning the withdrawal of the tax proposal but denied that this was with the purpose of influencing the elections (HTK, 27 November 1865, 247). However, all this was reason enough for a nephew of J.P.P. van Zuylen, J.P.J.A. van Zuylen, also a Member of Parliament, to ask for a parliamentary enquiry, a request which was discussed on 11 and 12 December 1865. During the debates in November and December, three points kept recurring, both in the newspapers and in Parliament. These three discussion points reveal what values were considered important for public officials: the distinction between the dependence or independence of public officials; the tension between serving the general interest or a particular interest; and finally the difference between the public and the private spheres.

First, there was the debate on the question whether politicians, public officials and civil servants were allowed to manipulate elections and so detract from the independence of public officials. On 18 November 1865, Van Zuylen asked questions about the independence of public officials and, during a Parliamentary debate, asked Thorbecke whether it was true that not only "direct influence" but also "indirect, more veiled influence, by granting financial support or benefiting local interests, can be beneficial for a clever liberal government" (HTK, 18 November 1865: 185). Thorbecke replied sarcastically, "Shall I consider these subjects important enough to answer?" Then he went on, more angrily, "I do not accept these kinds of charges (...). The Minister of the Interior has always taken care to ensure that civil servants (...) do not manipulate elections." Van Zuylen asked him whether men in public office, such as mayors, were allowed to influence elections. Thorbecke replied that a mayor could vote for whomever he wanted but was not allowed to use his influence for election purposes (HTK, 18 November 1865, 188 (5-7)). However, Van Zuylen replied, it was a well-known fact that during the 1864 elections mayors had manipulated the result by promoting certain candidates. Some of them had been reprimanded, but only after the election, when they had already damaged the independence of elections and candidates (HTK, 18 November 1865, 187).

Van Zuylen's questions and comments came as no surprise. Since 1848, cronyism and political favoritism had been openly condemned and were no longer formally commensurate with the public values that had become more and more dominant since 1848. During the 1850s and 1860s, however, violations of this value system still regularly occurred with regard to the appointment of civil servants, mayors and governors of provinces. Already in 1851, during Thorbecke's first term, the Prime Minister had dismissed the able Governor of the province of Gelderland because he was a conservative. In 1862, he had appointed G.H. Pijls mayor of the city of Maastricht in Limburg, of whom it was very clear that he was a liberal and actively supported the election of liberal candidates such as Van der Maesen (Lemmens, 2004: 201). Pijls was one of the leading figures in the Letters Affair. He was supposed to behave as a neutral public official, but not only did he try to favor the liberals in the election of 1864 but during the debates about the Letters Affair he also continuously wrote to Thorbecke and expressed his loyalty to the liberal leader in Parliament and press. In a letter of 14 November 1865 he told Thorbecke that he did "his utmost" to support the liberal leader and keep him informed, and called himself Thorbecke's "most dedicated servant" (Pijls to Thorbecke: 14 November 1865). G.H. Betz, too, thought nothing of influencing high-ranking civil servants. In a letter of 26 November 1865 he told Thorbecke why he had ordered the Limburg tax inspector to be lenient, explaining that he was honoring a "private" and "backdoor" agreement between him and the director. Betz explained that this kind of order had occurred frequently before 1865 as well, and that, on the other hand, it showed that Limburgers had always been treated with leniency in matters of taxation. He saw no real problem in this course of action (Betz to Thorbecke, 26 November 1865). However, not surprisingly this explanation was kept under wraps by both Betz and Thorbecke: they knew it was publicly considered "not done" to act like this.

Moreover, although the liberals had proclaimed in 1848 that elections should be free and that every form of cronyism had now ended, it was still common practice to make political appointments to offices that were ostensibly free of such considerations (De Jong, 1999: 49 and 50). This constituted a significant gap between the openly proclaimed public values of the liberals and actual political practice, in which leading liberal politicians used forms of patronage, clientelism, favoritism and cronyism when appointing public officials (Randeraad and Wolfrum, 2001: 114).

Furthermore, there was the question whether it was theoretically permitted to make an exception for one province in matters of tax regulation, as suggested by Betz in his letter to Van der Maesen. Van Zuylen asked, "Is it constitutional to revive the old provincialism and to divide our country again in as many little countries with closed borders as there are provinces?" In other words, would provincialism not conflict with the general interest and constitute a corrosion of the national sphere? (HTK, 18 November 1865). Van Zuylen had asked the question because the Limburg delegates were trying to defer the tax revisions and, together with the liberals, conservatives such as Van Zuylen also put the "general interest" above the local provincial interest. Limburg delegates used the same argument to defend themselves. On 13 November Limburg MP Van der Maesen said that a tax revision should be applied not only to Limburg but to the whole country (HTK, 13 November 1865). However, the proponents of the tax revision pointed out that in earlier tax

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revisions Limburg had not been included; it was exactly this revision that would bring Limburg inside the national tax regulation system (Lemmens, 2004: 194).

Van der Maesen had already been criticized before, both by defenders of the "general interest" and by proponents of the Limburg interest, so that he had to act discreetly during his communications with Betz. During the 1864 elections in Limburg he had been described in the local media as a proponent of the tax revision because he was a supporter of the liberal government and the Minister of Finance. It was an intense campaign. Opponents of the liberal candidates from Limburg, for instance F.H.C.E. Keverberg de Kessel and Van Wintershoven, started a real media campaign with the support of local newspapers, such as the *Veuloosch Weekblad*, using the slogan: "Get rid of the tax proposal, get rid of the Minister of Finance" (Lemmens, 2004: 195). Eventually Van der Maesen did get elected, but he and other liberals, including Thorbecke, had been acutely aware of the strong opposition to the proposal. Not surprisingly, Thorbecke had tried to delay the presentation of the tax proposal in Parliament until the following year. However, Minister of Finance Betz wanted no postponement. When Betz resigned in 1865, Thorbecke was said to be not terribly disappointed, as this would provide an opportunity to further delay the tax revision and so prevent his relationship with the liberal politicians from Limburg from deteriorating any further. The conservative newspaper *Dagblad van Zuid Holland en 's-Gravenhage* criticized Thorbecke's elusiveness: was not Thorbecke the man who since his arrival in 1848 had proclaimed that personal and local interest should be subservient to the general interest? (*Dagblad van Zuid-Holland en 's-Gravenhage*, 20-2 November 1865). Even after Betz's departure, with Thorbecke and his allies attempting to shelve the proposal, Parliament decided at the end of the year, by a close vote of 35 to 29, that the tax debate would take place and that no special exception for Limburg would be made.

However, in the official setting of Parliament there was hardly any disagreement concerning the immorality of manipulating elections or the impropriety of Limburg receiving special treatment. Both liberal and conservative MPs disapproved of these practices. Liberal MP Beyma thoe Kingma, for example, was against the enquiry, and conservative MP Asch van Wijk, in favor, but both agreed that elections should be without government influence and that the opposition in Limburg did not deserve their sympathy (HTK, 14 November 1865: 323, 324 and 329). MP W. Golstein argued that "the people in Limburg must not think that the result of an election can influence the proposal or withdrawal of a certain bill" (HTK, 3 December 1865: 308).

There was a third point of discussion, put forward by liberal MP W.J.A. Jonckbloet. The only evidence available, he said, was the alleged letters by Betz and Thorbecke, which had been mentioned by Van der Maesen in a confidential letter for "private use" without the intent to influence the elections (HTK, 11 December 1865: 323). His view gained the support of other liberal MPs, especially Van der Linden. This close ally of Thorbecke's pointed out that Van der Maesen's letter was "not an official document" but "a private letter" and that in his opinion "a private letter should not be discussed in public" (HTK, 12 December 1865: 342 (1)). In an earlier debate, Thorbecke had already stated that Betz's remarks were "special conversations" between "two per-

sons" who had a "private meeting" (HTK, 20 November 1865: 200 (3 and 4)). Moreover, before Van der Maesen had vacated his seat he had defended himself by pleading that Thorbecke's remarks were an "ill-considered private conversation which had a totally different aim than influencing the election" (HTK, 20 November 1865: 192). The fact that Betz had mentioned a controversial government proposal in a letter during election time and his agreement with the tax director were both defended as a "private" affair.

Interesting, too, is the contribution by Van Nierop, who argued that it was not at all odd that Thorbecke should write a letter to his political friend Van der Maesen. "We are indeed narrow-minded, very narrow-minded; is a Minister not allowed to write a letter, and may he not even write about what the government is intending to do?" Perhaps "England may be a useful example." There, Van Nierop said, Ministers are allowed to speak about their political intentions as a Minister. Complete plans and proposals are debated during the election campaign "even at public meals" (Van Nierop, 11 December 1865: 330 (1)). But this was exactly what liberals such as Thorbecke did not want: politicians and voters should be kept strictly separated because close connections would harm both their independence and the general interest.

In a reaction, J.P.J.A. van Zuylen defended his proposal for a parliamentary enquiry for the last time. If elections and taxation were discussed in a private letter in such a way as happened here, he concluded, people were allowed to ask questions about it. Van Zuylen also mentioned England. He pointed out that in England many instances of election corruption had taken place, but that the British were not so "frightened" as the Dutch to blame individuals in matters of "national interest." Although his opponents denied any corruption, Van Zuylen went on to say that "the withdrawal of the tax proposal was an excellent example of an instrument of corruption, because everybody knew exactly how much financial benefit it would deliver." Van Zuylen saw the withdrawal of the proposal as a form of bribery (HTK, 11 December 1865: 339 and 341). In the private letter to Thorbecke quoted earlier, Betz himself not only stated that he considered his letter to Van der Maesen a private affair, but he also called the lenient tax collection the result of a "private" and "backdoor" agreement between him and the Limburg director of taxes, which had been common practice for several years already (Betz to Thorbecke, 26 November 1865).

As we have seen, three major arguments were put forward as to why the Letters Affair should be seen as corruption. First, Betz's letter conflicted with the value that politicians should not influence the independence of elections or taxation, whether directly (by writing a letter containing promises) or indirectly (by appointing mayors and other public officials via favoritism or cronyism). Second, the letter containing Betz's promise conflicted with the political value that a particular interest (in this case the province of Limburg's) cannot be put above the general interest. Finally, there was discussion whether the letter was of private or of public concern. Liberals were ambivalent on this point, but the conservatives labelled the letter as a political document. However, from the viewpoint of liberal MP Van Nierop, who implicitly agreed with the conservatives by defending English practices, we may conclude that contacts between politicians and voters could be seen as a public matter. The liberals were under attack mainly because they seemed to

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have violated rules and values they themselves had established regarding the behavior of decent and good politicians. It was the public expectation of how men in public office – i.e., ministers, parliamentarians and mayors – should behave that the liberals had violated.

"The People of the Netherlands Have a Vital Need for Political Morality."

As early as 18 November Thorbecke and other liberals tried to downplay the matter by pointing out that it was not in keeping with the dignity and honor of the Parliament to discuss rumors "plucked from the slums and backstreet districts" (HTK, 18 November 1865: 186 (6)). According to the conservatives, especially Van Zuylen, it was of great importance for both the government and the country that there should be "clarity," so that rumors might be laid to rest (HTK, 18 November 1865: 187). The fact that Betz and Van der Maesen de Sombreff had already stood down as public officials was more than enough for liberal newspapers and politicians. And although the conservatives saw clear signs that the Letters Affair was a case of corruption, the fact that there was little room for debate caused much indignation among them. This was one of the main reasons why they asked for a parliamentary enquiry. The question then became: how should corruption be dealt with, and what kind of measures were necessary?

According to J.P.J.A. van Zuylen, who had proposed the parliamentary enquiry, it was a matter of "political morality" and had "nothing to do with making opposition (...)" but it is for the sake of warning the country that actions committed here, which I think earn disapproval, cannot pass unnoticed." Because ministers had to act "respectably" and "honorably," they must not be harmed by "suspicion" and "distrust," which makes it impossible for them to govern. "It is therefore necessary for the sake of the country and also for the Ministers, that their behavior should be clarified" (HTK, 11 December 1865: 318 and 319).

Van Zuylen received support not only from other Members of Parliament but also from citizens who wrote to Parliament. There is an interesting letter from the Maastricht businessman Petrus Regout, which was handed out to the Members on 11 December. He wrote that he was glad to see that a parliamentary enquiry had been proposed to deal with "acts of corruption." The enquiry would ensure that "no trace of ignoble behavior remain (...)" and on the other hand disapproval will come down on those who must be blamed for these acts" (HTK, 11 December 1865: 317). As an entrepreneur in Maastricht, Regout was continually obstructed by the liberal mayor Pijls, because Regout supported local anti-liberal candidates (Lemmens, 2004: 201). S. Moses, a councillor from the city of Haarlem, claimed in a letter to Parliament that the corruption in the Netherlands was even worse than in other European countries. The Catholic clergy in Limburg were especially susceptible to persuasion when "agents of Thorbecke (...): Van der Maesen, Pijls and former member of Parliament Cornelis" offered them money for their churches. An enquiry was necessary to restore dignity and stop these immoral acts. Moses considered this very important because "the people of the Netherlands (...) have a vital need for political morality for the sake of their peaceful development" (HTK, 11 December 1865: 319 and 320). Van Zuylen, Regout and Moses were convinced that an enquiry would have a cleans-

ing effect, would be beneficial to political dignity and public morality and would prevent this kind of corruption in the future.

MP Poortman opposed this view. He thought that an enquiry would only harm political and public morality further (HTK, 12 December 1865: 339). He received support from Jonckbloet, a liberal member of Parliament, who agreed that the matter had become a scandal. "This is a crisis and political emotions have not run as high as this for years." But Betz had already resigned, and Jonckbloet concluded that there was no real evidence that Thorbecke, too, had written a compromising letter. The evidence presented in the *Dagblad van Zuid-Holland en 's-Gravenhage* was unconvincing, because no controversial letter by Thorbecke had been found as yet. As a result, however, it was not only Thorbecke's "honor" that had been put into question but also "that of the whole country." The reality was otherwise, Jonckbloet claimed: Thorbecke was "politically honest," "unflinching" and "resolute" in his manner and appearance (HTK, 11 December 1865: 320 and 321). Liberal MP J.H. de Laet de Kanter also argued that the use of these kinds of rumors was "beneath the dignity" of Parliament, and that a parliamentary enquiry would only harm the dignity of Thorbecke and the country further (HTK, 11 December 1865: 326).

This was also the opinion of the liberal newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad*, which on 29 November 1865 wrote that the whole scandal had badly affected the position of the Netherlands abroad because the conservatives had informed the foreign press of the Letters Affair. "Never before has the foreign press paid so much attention to our country as in recent days. It is clear that the conservative opposition (...) uses the foreign press in a way which our own national press, with some exceptions, does not feel comfortable with. (...) It is our opinion that national feeling should rise up against this and that everybody should voice (...) a loud protest against these acts" (*Algemeen Handelsblad*, 29 November 1865). So, the liberal press was also concerned with the dignity of the country and thought that further investigation would cause more harm.

In the end, Van Zuylen failed to convince the Chamber, and on the second day of the debate the proposal for a Parliamentary enquiry received only 18 votes in favor, with 53 against. The debate had shown that there was disagreement about the way in which politicians could preserve their dignity in accordance with the general ideas about how to behave as a public official. For the conservatives, a Parliamentary enquiry would have restored the dignity of Parliament, stimulated political morality and benefited the honor of the country. The liberals disagreed, and eventually the Letters Affair would die a quiet death. The alleged letter by Thorbecke was never found.

Conclusion

The idea of what constitutes "corruption" changes over time. There is no single definition, but corruption should be linked to the changing (use of) public values. In general, corruption is concerned with damaging the public interest and abusing public power for private, group or local benefit. However, what is perceived as the general interest is not a static concept. On the other hand, there

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can be public agreement about the content of "general interest" and the importance of a public value system, but that does not imply that these values are always observed by public officials in practice. These aspects of (research into) corruption are all reflected in the Letters Affair.

As the Letters Affair shows, in the 1860s newspapers, politicians, civil servants and civilians from both the liberal and conservative camps confirmed several important public values formally established in 1848. Influencing the independence of elections and public officials, i.e., engaging in cronyism, was not permitted. There was also an agreement that everything of public importance, such as matters concerning taxation and elections, should be debated and decided in public settings, not, for example, in private letters. Finally, it was not allowed to put a particular (in this case provincial and party) interest above the general interest. It was thought that prominent liberals, who put a high value on "dignity" and "honorability," would respect this set of norms and values. The broad agreement about these public values makes clear why, accordingly, the Letters Affair was largely regarded as corruption; these values had been violated.

Especially in debates on how to deal with this case of corruption, some more general values of public morality were stressed anew. Public officials should behave with "dignity," "openness," "respect" and "honor." All parties more or less agreed that the resignations of Van der Maesen and Betz were justified because they had violated important values. There was no consensus, however, on what further action should be taken. The liberals continuously tried to downplay this question, as conservatives tried to get support for a parliamentary enquiry. Both parties were supported by their respective newspapers. The conservatives argued that a parliamentary enquiry would "clear" politics and recover the "political morality" and the "honor" of the country and the Ministers. Liberals took the opposite view: a more thorough investigation, based on mere rumors, would only cause more harm to public morality and political health. In any event, the question of which sanctions should be applied was an important factor in the debate. The resignations of Betz and Van der Maesen meant their public downfall, but no law was applied directly: the resignation was a form for dealing with corruption and a clear signal that something was really wrong. Prime Minister Thorbecke was for many people the embodiment of liberal values. Because Thorbecke himself did not stand down, the debate about corruption and the consequences could continue for many more weeks and become a real scandal.

The Letters Affair included civil servants, politicians, businessmen and ordinary citizens. Politicians such as Betz, Thorbecke, Van der Maesen and Van Zuylen were involved, as were civil servants such as Mayor Pijls of Maastricht. Businessmen like P. Regout also presented their opinions. Perhaps it was above all the newspapers that could be regarded as the spokesmen of citizens of different political and moral backgrounds, reflecting a varied public opinion. As we saw in the Letters Affair, the press was important and acted as the real whistleblower for the scandal. At first there were only the minor newspapers from Limburg, but eventually national newspapers such as the conservative *Dagblad van Zuid-Holland en 's-Gravenhage* and even the liberal *Algemeen Handelsblad* paid much attention to it as well. This shows that in the nineteenth century the role of the press was of growing importance for the eruption of public scandals. The existence of a national

political framework made it possible for newspapers and opposition politicians in Limburg to transfer the centre of the whole scandal from the province of Limburg to The Hague. In nineteenth-century Europe corruption scandals resulting from elections were common, and foreign examples were well-known among Dutch MPs, who used them in the debates. In England there were many cases of election corruption, which eventually led to investigations by a Royal Commission and resulted in the Corrupt Practices Act of 1854, by which election corruption was officially and legally condemned (Garrard, 2007: 37). In the Netherlands, in contrast, the liberals successfully prevented a parliamentary enquiry and effectively blocked such legislation by their silence.

What was crucial was the fact that public officials acted differently from their professed commitments. Such discrepancies are hardly new, but they created a special problem for the liberals as the authors of high-flying public ideals. In practice, it seemed difficult even for prominent liberals such as Thorbecke and Betz to adhere to their own established and publicly defended values of good public and political behavior. This applied especially to Betz, who not only wrote to Van der Maesen but also effectuated a "private" and "backdoor" agreement with the director of taxes in Limburg. The main difficulties were caused by the difference between the "formal" values and rules of public rectitude (heavily influenced by the liberals), on the one hand, and the "everyday rules" of political behavior, on the other, which itself was changing precisely because of the relatively open electoral system the liberals had also championed. This difference was a potential hotbed for corruption, because vagueness about "borders" and rules of public behavior is an important reason for the outbreak of a corruption scandal. In public, liberals and conservatives agreed with the political rules of 1848, but behind the scenes private interests and cronyism were still active. This shows a crucial paradox of (liberal) politics in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, politicians tried to morally renew the political system by introducing high standards of "good politics" and "good public behavior;" however, precisely because of their high moral standards, they became extremely vulnerable to allegations of corruption.

That is why in this case the liberals tried, with the support of the liberal press, to keep the case quiet from the beginning, although they knew public values had been violated. As in other European countries such as England, in the Netherlands the connection between public officials and voters was also becoming more direct. What is more, by the end of the 1860s liberals and conservatives were acting more and more as political parties. This shows another paradox of liberal politics: liberals claimed that they served the general interest, but the advancement of liberal values and norms required partisan party formation. By trying to become the most powerful political group, they had to win elections, act as a political party with a particular (self) interest, and, accordingly, were tempted to use methods that undermined their own principles. This increased their political vulnerability.

Rounding off, one can point to other noteworthy conclusions of research into nineteenth-century political corruption scandals and value systems. In Europe we see the establishment of national frameworks and a new political order with new boundaries between public and private, and between national and local. Other important features are the emergence of new forms of politics such

as direct elections and the professionalization of MPs, complemented by a growing importance of the press. Civil servants, parliamentarians, members of government and other public officials had strong mutual links and did not always know or observe the boundaries of the modern emerging state. However unclear or ignored, boundaries still are exponents of corruption scandals as the case of the "Bouwfraude,"³ described in the Preface, shows. In addition to the developments discussed in this article, the influence of industrialization, the new relationship between business and politics, the differences between nation states in Europe, and the dissimilarities between the United States and Europe will be addressed in further research. This should yield insight into the important changes in the development of public values, ideas on good governance and definitions of corruption in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Netherlands in an international perspective.

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